

Case Study Part Four:
Exploring the Appalachian
College Student Experience at Ohio Colleges

Ellie Burke

Educational Leadership Department, University of Connecticut

EDLR 5117: College Student Development Theory

Professor Ashley Robinson

April 25, 2023

The Appalachian student identity is one that many higher education and student affairs practitioners are unfamiliar with. It is not an identity that is commonly brought up in diversity and inclusion conversations; and it is an identity that there has been little research and literature on. The Appalachian mountains stretch across over 206,000 miles and extend through 13 states along the Eastern half of the United States (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2017). Many of these areas experience significant financial hardships, and at least 83 counties within the Appalachian region are considered within the markers for “economic distress” by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (“About the Appalachian Region,” 2023). Students within Appalachia face barriers that include finances, retaining connections to their home and communities, and a lack of resources such as familial support, college preparatory courses, and standardized test preparation for exams like the ACT (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

This paper will explore the experiences of two students from two counties in Southeastern Ohio that are located in Appalachia. I will be using Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model (CCWM) to explore their experiences and what we can learn from them regarding supporting students who hold Appalachian identities (Patton et al., 2016). Through this theory, I hope to explore the ways in which the resources – both material and social – students have access to can shape their experiences with higher education. Within this paper, I will provide background into the experiences of both students, describe the lens through which I will analyze their experiences, dive into the analysis, and then provide recommendations and implications for practice.

Summary of the Case

I interviewed two individuals (Maggie and Poppy) who identify as female and as Appalachian. Both women attended the public city schools in their small, rural, Southeastern Ohio hometowns from elementary to high school, and continued their education at public institutions within the state of Ohio. Neither Maggie nor Poppy were first-generation college students, however they noted that many of their friends and classmates that they graduated high

school with held those identities. They both described significant financial barriers as something that they faced upon trying to enter higher education, and both cited that their struggles with access to resources had a significant impact on their experiences as undergraduate students.

Both students described still feeling tightly connected to their hometowns and the Appalachian communities they grew up in. According to both women, the Appalachian identity is complex, multifaceted, and has a heavy emphasis on grit, pride and community. They are also communities that sometimes feel forgotten about and skeptical of outsiders and change.

Overview of the Theory

The Community Cultural Wealth Model (CCWM) was created by Tara Yosso in 2005. This model was designed in response to Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction. Its purpose was to focus on what students are bringing to institutions with regard to their values, cultures, and experiences rather than putting a focus on what these students lack – which is what Bourdieu's theory emphasizes. Yosso's critique says that "focusing on what students lack ignores the values and culture that working-class and low-income students take along as they enter college" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 254).

The CCWM describes six forms of capital that students can use as they navigate the world, as well as higher education institutions. These six forms are: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. *Aspirational capital* refers to students' capacity to remain hopeful and optimistic despite the barriers they may face; their resilience. The ability to communicate within diverse communities and with different communication styles is called *linguistic capital*. A shared sense of knowledge, memory, and community is considered *familial capital* and is gained through close connections with their family and culture. *Social capital* describes the support networks that students develop and use to connect them with others, as well as community resources. The set of skills required for students to "traverse diverse institutional settings, particularly those that are unwelcoming due to

oppressive structures” (Patton et al., 2016, 255) is their *navigational capital*. Finally, *resistant capital* describes the oppositional behavior that allows students to disrupt dominant narratives.

The barrier of access to resources had a lasting impact on both Poppy and Maggie beyond their admission to higher education. Their lack of access to financial, social, and educational resources became a deciding factor in their selection of which institution to attend, and influenced both of their major changes between when they started college and when they graduated. Because resources showed up as such a common thread, I selected Yosso’s CCWM to analyze their experiences through the lens of these forms of capital. I believe that through this process, I will be able to identify areas of greater need that we can be aware of and better support through practice.

Analysis

Using the CCWM, I will explore Maggie and Poppy’s journeys to access higher education institutions. I would like to note that all six forms of capital described in the CCWM can have an incredible impact on students as they navigate higher education. Through this case study, however, I will put a primary focus on four forms of capital (familial, social, resistant, and aspirational). Navigational capital and linguistic capital likely had an impact on both women’s experiences, however, due to the limitations of the questions asked in the interviews, I do not feel as though I have enough information around these forms of capital to adequately analyze the influence on their experiences.

Familial

For many Appalachian students, attending college is something they are doing without family/supporters that understand college structures and processes – a journey they are facing without access to familial capital. Maggie and Poppy both described first-generation college student status as something many of their high school classmates experienced. Without familial capital, the college admissions process and the limited resources available through their communities and education systems provide barriers of access to them. Maggie and Poppy’s

parents attended higher education institutions, and neither of them identify as first generation students. They both had access to their parents' experiences and the capital that comes with them. However, they both described their parents' support as something that was present, but was also "hands-off" and placed a lot of the responsibility of navigating the admissions process on them. Because of this "hands-off" approach, analyzing Poppy's experiences through the lens of her familial capital becomes tricky. However, in Maggie's experience of accessing higher education, her familial capital would be a deciding factor in her college selection process.

Maggie's father continued his education after completing his undergraduate degree, and then became a faculty member at the institution closest to them, Pawpaw University. As Maggie had researched programs she was interested in and completed college tours, Pawpaw was not the institution she wanted to attend. Maggie had her heart set on attending a private liberal arts institution as a dance major, and she decided to apply to two state schools (Pawpaw and State University) and two private liberal arts schools (Buzzard College and Founders College). She was accepted to Pawpaw, State University, and Buzzard College, and was waitlisted at Founders College. As she compared the institutions and the aid offers she received, her familial capital started to have a bigger influence on her experience.

The financial element of attending college was a huge consideration for Maggie. While she received a good scholarship through Buzzard College, the tuition would still be around \$24,000 per year. Alternatively, Maggie could attend Pawpaw University and receive a full tuition waiver through her father's position as faculty at the university. In the end, she sat down with her father and discussed her options. He told her that she likely wasn't going to find anything better than free. Maggie was able to use her familial capital through both the social element of someone she could go to for support through a difficult decision and also the financial element of her father's position providing access.

Social

For some Appalachian students, they can find strong ties through their social capital. Relationships with their fellow classmates, teachers they encounter in high school, and community involvement can increase their social capital and make a significant impact on their access to higher education. Poppy's access to higher education became entirely dependent on her social capital and solidified her access to college.

Poppy also applied to Pawpaw University's main campus and one of Pawpaw University's five regional campuses, as well as State University. She was originally planning to attend the regional campus of Pawpaw University due to its proximity to home so she could save money on housing, as well as the lower tuition that came with attending a regional campus. However, her relationship with an alumni of her high school she knew through her extracurricular involvement – her social capital – opened the opportunity for her to become aware of a Land Grant Scholarship through State University. This scholarship was something her friend had also received, and encouraged her to apply for it. She was able to qualify and was selected as the recipient of the scholarship, which covered the entirety of her tuition and housing costs for her four-year degree. This was the biggest reason she had access to college.

Resistant

Throughout Appalachia, many students do not make it to higher education. They graduate from high school and go directly into the workforce or study a trade and work in that field. The lack of financial resources and college preparation in the K-12 public schools creates a barrier that many students cannot cross. For some students, moving outside of their communities and attending college becomes a way for them to get out of the generational oppression they faced growing up.

Maggie and Poppy were both able to find a way to attend college, and even continue their education beyond a bachelor's degree. These actions alone defy the dominant narratives that are prevalent within Appalachian communities; where even if your parents attended college, it may not always be something that is expected or even something that is accessible. They used – and

continue to use today as they work toward advanced degrees – their resistant capital to step outside of those norms within their communities.

Aspirational

Communities within Appalachia are often tight-knit and supportive. Maggie described her fellow community members as devoted to each other, proud of their Appalachian roots, and wary of outsiders. These communities can help students within Appalachia to keep their spirits high and find the optimism to push through tough barriers. Maggie explained that, although she was hesitant to stay in her hometown and attend Pawpaw University at first, she found a renewed sense of pride and belonging. Instead of pushing it away, she embraced the hope, resilience, and grit within the community; her aspirational capital to continue throughout her education.

Recommendations for Practice

My first recommendation is for higher education institutions and/or non-profit organizations to work together within Appalachian communities to create an outreach program for high school students. These programs could serve as opportunities for high school students to start exploring and getting comfortable in spaces on college campuses. Currently enrolled college students with Appalachian identities could serve as mentors along with professional staff for high school juniors and seniors as they start thinking about the college admissions process or their journeys into college. Specific areas that these programs could focus on include how to find fee waivers for college applications, finding scholarship opportunities in their communities and at the institutions they are interested in, and helping students to understand what financial aid packages actually mean so they have increased financial literacy upon entering the institution.

Another step is to reevaluate the existing admissions processes at most institutions. An easy way that colleges – especially institutions that tend to see more Appalachian students – could better support this demographic is to explicitly ask students on their applications if they identify as Appalachian. This would be an opt-in opportunity – not a required question – for

students to have access to additional information and resources about what to expect during their transition. It could help streamline their transition and could even get them connected with a resource as simple as a static booklet with definitions and contact information, or an additional orientation module that provides more support relevant to their Appalachian experience.

The biggest overlapping theme throughout both interviews was the resource gap and the financial barrier. This is also a common theme for Appalachian students beyond just Maggie and Poppy. My final recommendation has two parts, the first of which is to increase opportunities for Appalachian students to have access to fee waivers for test prep for ACT/SATs, college admissions applications, and other miscellaneous costs associated with attempting to enter college. The second part is to increase how we market and explain the financial aid options and scholarships available to all students, but particularly those opportunities that already exist for this population. Scholarships and other funding opportunities specifically for Appalachian students *do* exist, but most students are not aware of them.

Implications for Practitioners

Beyond the structural recommendations, there are smaller steps that all higher education and student affairs practitioners can take to support these students. The first implication/recommendation for individuals I have is to learn as much as you can about this identity group. It may require more work than learning about other identity groups because there is very little existing literature on Appalachian students. While there are many similarities between rural students and Appalachian students – and most Appalachian students *are also* rural students – their experiences are *not* the same. Literature on rural students can begin the conversation but may not be fully relevant to the Appalachian experience. To be an Appalachian means something different to each person, but the overarching theme is that they are stubborn, gritty, and have a sense of identity and unique culture in a way rural communities outside of Appalachia do not.

Practitioners can also ensure that they are familiar with the resources available on their campus and know who they can refer students to for different kinds of situations and struggles. Higher education institutions often have resources and educational opportunities for students that Appalachian students did not have access to in their home communities. Resources such as mental health services, STI testing, and identity centers can serve as opportunities for students to get support in ways that they have not experienced before. If practitioners know what is available, they can have contacts for campus resources at the ready if there is ever an opportunity to support Appalachian students in those ways.

Conclusion

The Appalachian student experience is unique and an identity that requires an expansion of the research into how they interact with higher education. Access to resources can serve as a pivotal decision point for their entry into college and is an area where increased support is required. By implementing outreach programs, increasing access to financial support, and providing more opportunities to share necessary information to students, higher education institutions and practitioners can better support this population of students.

References

Appalachian Regional Commission. (n.d.). *About the appalachian region*.

<https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>

Friesen, L. & Purc-Stephenson, R.J. (2016). Should I stay or should I go? Perceived barriers to pursuing a university education for persons in rural areas. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 46, 138-155.

Patton, Renn, K.A., Guido-DiBrito, F., & Quaye, S.J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (Third edition.). Jossey-Bass & Pfeiffer.

Pollard, K. & Jacobsen, L.A. (2017). The Appalachian region: A data overview from the 2011-2015 American community survey. *Chartbrook prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission* (contract #CO-18662-16).